

## **Introduction**

You're listening to *Opening the Tent: Stories of Jewish Belonging*, an original podcast produced by the NYU Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life. Our guest today is Maggie Sonenshine, a first year student in Steinhardt studying Early Childhood and Special Education.

## **Maggie Sonenshine**

Apparently, when we were first learning about the Shema, in preschool or kindergarten, I went home and asked my mom how old God was. And she gave me admittedly like a very good answer, like, "oh, God is as old as the universe because God created everything". And then I got really mad at her, insisting "No, God is one years old". And she said, "No, he's this, like omnipotent being who's as old as all of us". But I said, "No, in the prayer, we say, The Lord is our God, the Lord is one". Our Cantor would always tell that story in like sermony things and I would feel really called out, he wouldn't say me by name, but I knew. That's a that's a defining moment of my early Jewish awareness. That and like baking challah every Friday, in preschool, we would make little mini ones and take them home. The temple that I went to my dad grew up going to, my grandparents were really big part of building that Jewish community, so it was important to us to go there. But I didn't go to a Jewish school. So I didn't have off for holidays, or anything. And there were only one or two other Jewish kids in my grade. But I was always incredibly vocal about it. Because it's a big part of my identity and a big part of who I am. I can think of a couple of times in elementary school that really, I felt kind of othered, both around Christmas, there was a huge Christmas tree in the library. And the elementary schoolers, every class would make ornaments to put on the tree and they were usually like tissue paper, green and red. But I would always get to do a little like Star of David with like blue and yellow, and it obviously stuck out against everybody else's. Also, there was a really big emphasis on doing a nativity scene. Every year, all the parents would videotape it, like there was like this gross plastic baby they pulled out every year to be Jesus. And it wasn't necessarily a religious school, but like, there was a cross on the school's logo and there were not a lot of Jewish students. It was weird not being able to relate to a lot of like the traditions like in my school And that my friends had. I went to a boarding school for high school and the Jewish holidays were like a really big thing for my family. When I was deciding to go, I made a deal that I would come home for one of the High Holidays and also my parents, for three years in a row, came up to my school

and hosted a Passover Seder for any student that wanted to come, which was a really special experience for me, getting to share that with my friends and teachers. And then I don't know like being here at NYU was definitely the most in touch I've felt with my Judaism. I think growing up it felt like an obligation. I had to go to Sunday school, I had to go to Hebrew school, I did youth group. Here, like my involvement in Jewish communities has been more of something that I wanted to do, that I enjoy doing, that felt like a sense of natural community versus something I was forced to do. The first like virtual NYU thing I went to that wasn't like an orientation was Keshet Shabbat. It was over the summer. And even though I knew no one there, I loved it already. And I felt very included. And I was just so in awe of all these people that I'm now friends with, which is such a cool thing. I think just talking to friends with different religious beliefs, the Jewish community at NYU has been incredibly strong during COVID and made a lot of intentional efforts to continue to meet regularly and have events and classes and opportunities for learning. Even more importantly than learning, opportunities for just community and space. That's been really valuable, adjusting to a new place, meeting new people and feeling like I have like a home.

Everybody comes to NYU with a different background, a different upbringing, and with that different knowledges of different faiths. And I think it can be hard, especially with Judaism, for people to have like one idea of how Judaism is supposed to be, and anything else that kind of challenges that. And sometimes even within certain parts of the Jewish community, I feel like there can be like a resistance to change. But at the end of the day, that's what I really admire about Judaism is like its fluidity. There's like no one way to be Jewish, and the ability for there to be multiple interpretations of things and space for everyone to feel like it's their own religion. I feel very lucky that I have this community and I look forward to hopefully, fingers crossed knock on wood, spending time with these communities in person because that's going to make it even more special.

## **Outro**

Thanks for listening. This episode was produced by the b|hive story collective at the NYU Bronfman Center. Subscribe on Spotify or Apple Podcasts for new episodes every Monday.

